

Women who have left the church

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COMPILER'S COMMENTS

How many times now have I left the church and come back again? It's not how a story of commitment and loyalty should read! Somewhere along the way I failed to follow the dominant discourse of my denominational tradition. As a result of my own curiosity and a strong desire to give voice to other stories of "leaving," I consented to compile this issue of *Women's Concerns Report*. I want to thank each contributor for sharing the

sensitivities of their own particular process. I am reminded of the cross in each of these stories, a symbol that signifies new beginnings after endings.

Each of these women speaks of initial experiences of spiritual and social connection within the church community. For me, the gathering of believers became an extension of the biological family—a place of belonging, comfort and social relationships alongside spiritual nurture and instruction. Baptism at age 16 permitted me to become a member of the institutional church. Participation by the youth was welcomed in that rural Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren congregation. I recall now with wonder that as a group of teens in the mid-60's, we decided to attend and speak to issues at the church business meetings and no one reprimanded us! As I exercised my gifts in the church context, I came to believe that I was a valuable contributor. I will always be grateful for that foundation.

How can such secure beginnings lead to later ambivalence, betrayals, and wrenching separations? The individual narratives that follow give us clues as to what contributes to the "leaving." Most notably I observe that while there was a decision to leave the church by these women, a predominant subtext illustrates how the church, during that process, left them.



How can such secure beginnings lead to later ambivalence, betrayals, and wrenching separations? The individual narratives that follow give us clues as to what contributes to the leaving.

Vange Willms Thiessen lives in Abbotsford, British Columbia. She is married to Steve and has four children and three grandchildren. She has a private practice in couple and family therapy and is also the clinical director of the Master of Counseling program at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools in Langley, British Columbia.

Early in the stories, I hear the confusion, disappointment and frustration of threatened relationships and the futile attempts to resolve differences of diversity within the church.

In these stories, there seem to be certain common elements among the varied challenges. The pressures of conformity to a set of preferred beliefs and practices fosters fear of disapproval and exclusion. The arrogance of certainty prevents many searching individuals from asking their questions. Often impermeable boundaries around tradition and acceptable behavior create a sense of being "in" or "out." When it appears that integrity and authenticity of the self are sacrificed for the sake of belonging, I hear the struggle intensify for these women. How do we honor honesty in our congregations without pushing people to the edges of abandonment and rejection?

My own personal journey of faith and inquiry repeatedly brought me up against the constraints of church tradition and practice. I, too, chose to distance myself in order to move from closed doors to "opening spaces." After each episode of separation, mourning and discovery, I searched for new communities that would honor openness, exploration, discernment and inclusion. Currently, I have found a church home at Point Grey Inter-Mennonite Fellowship in Vancouver. Once again I am grateful.

The desire for Christ-like values rather than dogma; honoring discovery, diversity and acceptance; longing for justice, equality, mercy and peace; these are some of the threads weaving together these stories of faithfulness, leaving and loss. My hope is that in these accounts we can hear the call to greater integrity, diversity and inclusion for all.

—Vange Willms Thiessen, compiler

FROM THE *editor*

Several of our readers have requested to hear from those who have left the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. This sounded like an interesting project, but we had no idea what direction the articles might take. Women leave our churches for many reasons. Some leave because they experience racism or sexism. Some are looking for a different kind of

worship experience like Catholic, Episcopal, or Quaker. Others are seeking a spiritual experience that is not found in any Christian church or no longer hold any faith. Some have experienced abuse at the hands of church leaders. Still others feel that they are pushed out of the church because their beliefs do not fit comfortably into church doctrine or because of their sexual orientation. In fact, since there has been so much recent debate over whether or not homosexuals should be a part of the church, we did plan to include an article by a lesbian. We were not given the permission to do so. Apparently, even when listening to women who are challenging how we define who is in and out of the church, the issue of homosexuality is still too controversial to discuss.

There are many reasons why women leave the church, both controversial and non-controversial, and we can not begin to represent every one. Instead we offer a few personal stories. These are women who have found themselves led in ways that are beyond the boundaries of the Mennonite

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and Brethren in Christ conferences. A few have found a home in other church denominations. Others have chosen an individual spiritual path. Also in this issue, Karin Kliwer provides a dramatic dialogue that looks at women's struggle to use their gifts in the church—one reason that has caused some women to leave.

The articles in this issue may take you beyond your comfort zone. Some of you may be saddened by what seems like unfair barriers set up against these

women. Others may feel that the writers' beliefs and actions rightfully place them outside the Christian church. This issue is not meant to make us feel comfortable. Instead, it offers the opportunity to continue conversation with women from our denominations who may have different beliefs than our own and challenges us on our understanding of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches.

—Debra Gingerich, editor

Life after church

Notes from a recovering church member

If you compare it to calcium storage, I had enough church attendance in my first twenty years of life to make it through my full life without breaking a spiritual hip. It was one way to measure the difference between dedication and backsliding: Sunday morning service, Sunday evening service, Monday Pioneer Girls, Wednesday choir practice, Friday Youth Group, deacon's meetings, church business meetings, and board and committee participation.

I grew up knowing that non-Christians were simply not like us. They were desperate people without hope or joy. They beat each other up, drank alcohol, committed murder, and danced. Some of them even smoked. Now and then, one of them got saved and testified in church about how they no longer beat, drank, murdered or danced. Their cravings for nicotine disappeared overnight. They'd found hope and joy. It was thrilling.

Then I found a big fly wiggling in the ointment. What if you already know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are saved, but you still feel desperate and hopeless from time to time? What then?

Invisible Woman

I became a Christian at the age of five. I clearly recall the narrow bed in which I prayed for salvation, with my parents beside me. Of the many things I came to question later, I've never questioned the reality of that moment. The sense of Jesus *with* me is something that has stayed with me through a great deal. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. After that, it gets a little fuzzy for me.

I remember stopping to tell the pastor something on the way out of the sanctuary one Sunday. I'm sure my story was as incoherent as most youngsters' stories usually are. My parents apologetically pulled me away, shushing me so the adults could talk. I felt a flush of embarrassment. I was a thin-skinned child, prone to taking things far too seriously. Apparently, whenever we entered the church, I developed the urgent need to visit the washroom. It was the first of many subtle lessons in church hierarchy.

by Roxanne Willems Snopek

Roxanne Willems Snopek is an award-winning freelance writer and author of over 150 articles. Her articles on faith have appeared in such publications as *Christianity Today*, *The Mennonite Brethren Herald*, and *BC Christian News*. She lives in British Columbia with her husband, three daughters and a vast array of pets.



But at a recent service I attended, the pastor held up a spatula. "Know what this is?" he shouted to the audience. "It's a tool of evangelism! Invite your neighbor over for a barbeque; then invite him to church!"



Children were tolerated if quiet. Women could sing, teach children's Sunday school, and bake buns. Men led the choir, taught the adults, preached sermons and ate the buns. The party line was "brothers and sisters in Christ," but the hidden agenda was "men before women, boys before girls and adults before children."

Family of God

These days the connection between emotional problems and family dynamics is well documented. Today private torment is demystified with names: depression, social anxiety disorder, panic attacks, eating disorders. Unfortunately during my adolescence, all I knew was that something was wrong with *me*. It was worse at church, especially church socials. Kids sat with their friends, husband-wife duos sat with other husband-wife duos, single women sat with other single women. I have no idea where single men sat. My problem was that I seldom had friends to sit with so I slunk after my parents like a hungry stray dog, poised to dash away. As soon as possible, I'd creep away to my real sanctuary—the church library. Danny Orlis and Grace Livingston Hill were my friends.

I have a mental snapshot of our family singing at one such function: *You may notice we say Brother and Sister 'round here, It's because we're a family and these folks are so dear. When one shares a heartache, we all shed a tear. . . . I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God!* What I would have given for that to be reality!

Community of Sideway Glances

Years later, after lots of therapy, I learned to talk to people without fainting. I was dealing with my potluck phobia. I even had a nice boyfriend. However, I tweaked the Livingston Hill books' formula slightly. Before I led him to Christ I moved in with him.

The response was predictable: "What will we tell people?" I wanted to hear, "Are you happy? Does he treat you well?" Instead I heard, "What will people think?"

When we became engaged, I phoned my hometown pastor, who did lovely wedding ceremonies. I was surprised to hear the lack of enthusiasm in his voice. I figured he was having a bad day.

"We'd love for you to perform the ceremony," I persisted naively, like a child pressing a bouquet of wilting dandelions onto a substitute teacher.

"This man you want to marry," he asked coldly, "is he a man of God?"

That's when I realized he had never been my pastor. He didn't ask me how I was or what scars life had dealt me. He didn't ask if I was still a woman of God. He assumed that he already had those answers.

He eventually agreed to marry us, provided we first receive extensive premarital counseling from him. The fact that we were flying in two days before the ceremony was apparently lost on him, but by then his appeal was lost on me. We called another preacher, booked a chapel, and had a beautiful wedding.

Amway Evangelism

Later still, I had a brief and forgettable interlude in cosmetics sales. Talk about how to clear a room! I had people actually blanch and back away, like I was offering anthrax on a blush-brush. I quickly learned why. The whole emphasis was on working your circle of friends and acquaintances, on never losing an opportunity to spread the gospel of good skin. At my last meeting, I was told to cultivate "quality" people because they would be my most likely customers. That was it for me. Who am I to judge between "quality" and . . . what? "Trash?" "Unworthy?"

But at a recent service I attended, the pastor held up a spatula. "Know what this is?" he shouted to the audience. "It's a tool of evangelism! Invite your neighbor over for a barbeque; then invite him to church!"

I understand about the great commission. I know there is only the best of intentions behind most friendship evangelism, but if everyone had the chance to be on the receiving end, I believe evangelism would change. I don't want to be anyone's project. I don't want to be a notch on anyone's Bible or a mark toward a number goal. No one does. Sales or salvation, friendship shouldn't have an agenda.

Some Christians act like kind-hearted oasis water-hole owners, thinking that their jug of water is the answer to everything. Some people they meet will have just dragged themselves in from the desert. But others of us are dipping our toes in the ocean, marveling at how wide it is.

Brokenness

When I graduated from Bible school many years ago, I could pray eloquently and spout theological buzzwords with the best of them. Today, my prayers consist mostly of "help me," "I'm sorry," and "thank you." Why has my journey gone in the direction it has? I wish I knew. In my heart-of-hearts, I miss the comfort of church. It's easier to be on the inside than the outside. But for me, being an authentic, searching Christian means I don't fit neatly into the traditional church home. Is this a cop-out? Is it cowardice? Maybe. But right now it's where I am, experiencing Christ as a newcomer, instead of one bred and born into the faith.

I do attend church sometimes but I do it carefully. A lot of baggage lands on me when I walk through the doors, baggage that's hard to see around. And I really want to see. ♦

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A greater view of God outside the church

by Janice Thiessen

Janice Thiessen lives in Victoria, British Columbia. She is married with an 11-year-old son and has a Master of Science in Nursing.

I was born into a family that belonged to the Mennonite Brethren Conference. Our family lived in a small farming community and traveled some distance to worship with the nearest local congregation. Our church and my parents were evangelical, with a strong desire to bring people both near and far to Christianity.

Because of the strong belief in life after death in heaven or hell, my parents and church were very eager to ensure their children were “saved” at a young age. When my parents asked me if I was saved, I recall the dilemma I felt in trying to give them a satisfactory answer and also remain true to myself. I was unsure so thought the truthful answer to the question was probably no. I knew, however, that if I answered no, I would be gently and lovingly pressured, but pressured nonetheless, to become a Christian. Although I was not ready to do this, I loved my parents. I wanted them to be happy, and I wanted to be comfortable in the family, so I answered, “Yes.” I justified this answer because someone had prayed with me to be saved when I was about four years old. Yet, my duplicity bothered me. Every time my parents did not come home when I expected them to, I worried that the rapture had occurred and that I had been left behind.

Although my parents did not teach this, I absorbed the idea that Mennonites (i.e. Mennonite Brethren) were the best Christians, the most likely to get into heaven, and the only ones who were really good people. My eyes began to open at age 13 when I was hospitalized for several months. I shared a four-bed ward with a range of people who were good, kind, caring and generous, and yet were not Christians, let alone Mennonites. Some of them even smoked! The narrowness of our beliefs started to bother me. How could such good people not have a chance of a good life after death?

As a teenager I did believe and accept Christianity, but was still bothered by some of the interpretations of the Bible used by our religious denomination. The separation from the larger community was both a comfort and an embarrassment. We could spend much time with like-minded people, but we didn’t participate or socialize much and thus appeared to condemn many of the community people and activities.

After high school graduation, young people were encouraged to attend Bible school to help them become grounded in the faith. Another less explicit purpose was to increase the likelihood of finding a mate with similar background and beliefs. I felt reluctant to go to Bible school and angry at the pressure I felt to comply. However, at the end of high school, I had a deep and moving spiritual experience of the presence and power of God. The anger and resentment left me, and I felt able to proceed to Bible school. I hoped for greater spiritual insight in a nurturing and caring environment. This did not happen at the Mennonite Bible school I attended. Because I was quiet, a little socially inept, not musical and not athletic, I was on the fringe of many of the activities and interaction. There seemed to be a strong social hierarchy that blocked people from seeing and getting to know others as individual people. What a relief it was for me to attend a secular university after that!

I stayed involved with an evangelical church through university and for a number of years after. I stayed because of my faith in God, but I was also aware that there was a security in being separated from the “world.” My questions and unresolved issues mounted, but I felt that in time answers would become clearer. Some of my concerns had to do with the exclusivity and arrogance of our brand of Christianity. Perhaps our loving God was not so loving if “he” was condemning

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most of the earth's population, both past and present. I struggled with the paternalistic nature of the church and the less than equal status of women. I was also feeling bound by the restriction of activities that were "just not done by Christians." Involvement in social concerns seemed only valid if the goal was to lead people to Christ.

I eventually realized that the doubts and restrictions outweighed the belief I had. This awareness filled me with a great sense of relief and freedom, as well as a great sense of loss. I hoped that God was greater than the church's beliefs. The church seemed so set in its understanding of who God was and what God expected of us that I did not think I would find a greater God if I stayed within the church.

I married a lovely man who was not a Christian and had no desire to become one. I myself had no desire to return to the church. I became more aware and concerned about the world around me: the need for peace, the need for more equitable sharing of our resources, the need for respect and conservation of our environment. It did not seem like these were particular concerns of the churches I had been involved in. Their focus seemed to be more on preparing for life after death than on working together to make this a better world here and now.

We eventually found our way to the Quakers. At first I couldn't imagine what people did while they sat quietly together. No person was preaching or teaching. In the quietness, I listened for God to speak directly to me. As I learned more about Quaker ways and Quaker testimonies, I started to feel like I had come home. There was not a creed of beliefs that

everyone adhered to but a set of values that allowed for great diversity, discovery and acceptance. The Quaker testimonies of peace, integrity, simplicity, and equality have led to powerful social action throughout their history. These testimonies also rang true for me in light of Jesus' teachings. Although we are only partially involved with the Quakers, they have provided a context for our lives and for sharing our values with our son.

I think I am more at peace within myself now than when I was immersed in an evangelical church. Who is a Christian? Are my sins forgiven? Is there life after death? Is there heaven and hell? What will happen in the "end times"? These questions that seemed so important in the past now seem irrelevant. I believe in God, but I hesitate to put that belief into words that would restrict or limit God. There is "that of God" in everyone. The Kingdom of God is within and among us, and that is where I want to be. ♦

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Leaving my father's house

by Hildegard Scheffler-Lemke

Hildegard Scheffler-Lemke lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. She is married with three children. She volunteers in church and the community and has a new career in art making, specifically painting exhibits and teaching courses on painting on silk.

We experienced so many miracles of protection that faith in a caring God was deeply anchored to my experience.

I was born into a Mennonite home in Germany. My father was the pastor of four congregations in the south of the country. My mother, who had grown up in Russia, came from a Mennonite Brethren orientation and was therefore stricter than the German Mennonites. Generally speaking, it was my father's generosity of spirit and his great sense of humor that won the day. I grew up feeling secure in the love of God and not overly concerned that I could never satisfy the strict demands of a righteous God.

This was the time of the Second World War, and our lives were constantly disrupted and endangered. Eighty-five percent of our city was destroyed by bombs, and during that time we experienced so many miracles of protection that faith in a caring God was deeply anchored to my experience. I remember my devotion as a teenager. I would get up at five to study the Bible and pray. I taught Sunday school. At 15 years old, I was baptized on the confession of my faith. I had accepted my parent's faith and now tried to live it.

In 1951 our family immigrated to the United States where we built a new existence and learned to know a variety of Mennonites and people of other faiths that seemed as different and strange as everything else in this new land. I remember struggling to sort out what was important, but the faith of my father was a solid anchor.

Years went by. I completed my university education, got married and moved to Vancouver where my husband and I joined our first Canadian Mennonite church. We soon discovered that here we would always be outsiders. It seemed that membership was based on family ties, ethnic roots, ways of doing things and ways of speaking rather than a common faith. Communion, the great fellowship meal of the Mennonites, became a sham for me. We worked very hard to fit in and be accepted to no avail. For the first time in my life, I became deeply unhappy with the

church. I realized that my growing spiritual hunger would not be satisfied here.

Eventually a daughter church was built. We joined full of hope that here we would find what we were looking for. We participated fully and in due course took leadership of the young people's group.

Around this time we met a couple who led the young people's group at a Baptist church. Learning to know this couple and sharing with them about faith issues challenged and excited me both intellectually and spiritually. We exchanged ideas on youth work, and eventually we opened our home for weekend retreats where we explored beyond denominational boundaries what God might have in store for us and how we could grow and expand our faith horizons. During this time, I personally opened many new doors in the house of my father's faith.

Together with the other couple, we started to organize an interfaith home group that met my entire spiritual needs. Our time together culminated in a shared experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which introduced a new dimension into our faith life that involved our emotions to a much greater degree. We were full of excitement and zeal as we tried to live our understanding of New Testament Christianity.

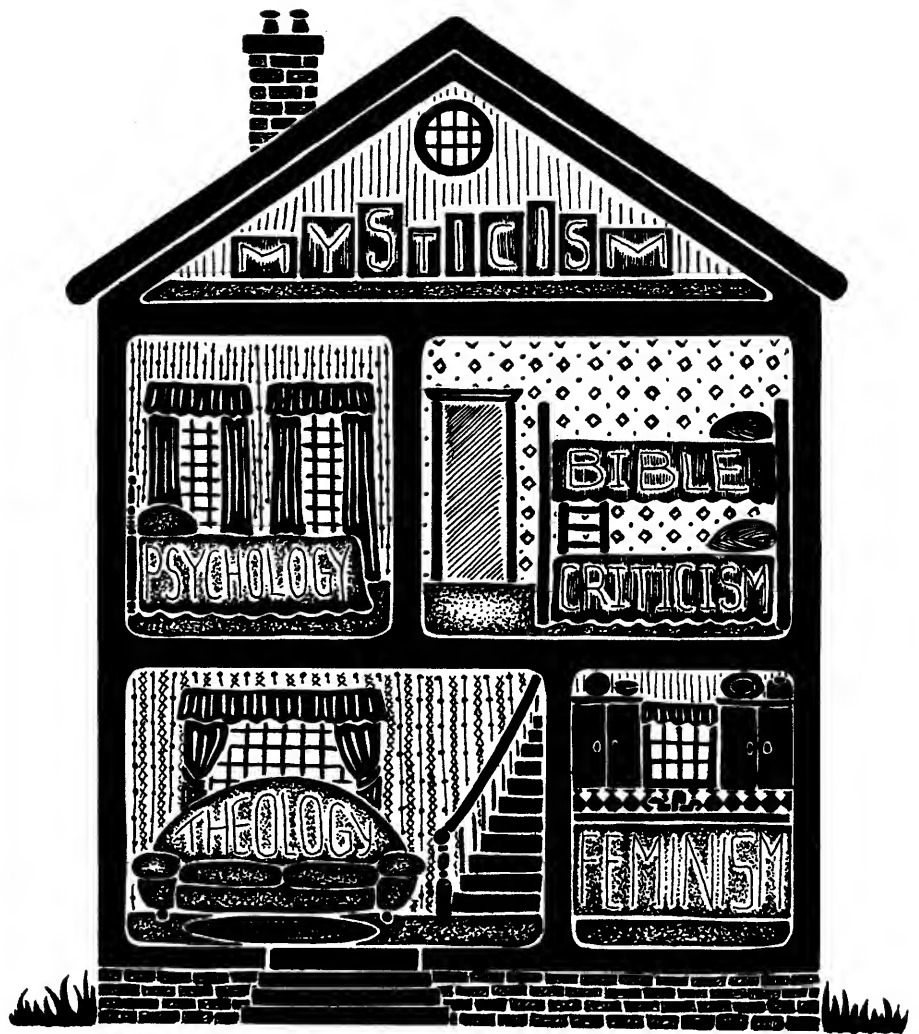
Unfortunately our churches looked very unfavorably on our beloved home group, fearing that we would be led astray. At that time the matter of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was a hugely divisive issue, not at all acceptable to either Mennonites or Baptists. Although we did not speak of our extraordinary experiences in the congregation, eventually we were asked to leave the church. I did not feel the pain of being excommunicated as keenly as I might have because life in the Spirit and in the home group gave me much comfort and reassurance that we were where God wanted us to be.

Another door had opened and closed again. It took some time to find a new church home, but eventually we joined

a body of believers that thrilled us because it was spiritually alive and totally inclusive, quite in contrast to our previous experiences. However when the leadership of this church changed, the direction changed. We lost our freedom to think for ourselves and were systematically steered back into an Old Testament model based on hierarchical and patriarchal values and practices. Since the input of women was highly discouraged, I had a growing sense of alienation. I had to separate my experience of God and his/her ways from that of the church. I had to separate out my experience and consider it valid in spite of it being different from my husband's experience. To survive spiritually, I had to leave my father's house and find my own.

I was 49 years old and had reached a stage in life where I needed to get rid of a lot of religious baggage. Moving from my father's house into a new one was truly terrifying. I held firm to a quote by Scott Peck: "We begin by distrusting what we already believe, by actively seeking the threatening and unfamiliar, by deliberately challenging the validity of what we have previously been taught and hold dear. The Path to holiness lies through questioning everything." Also important to me was a quote attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of St. Thomas: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

With these thoughts as guides I began to explore my new house. One room after another offered its riches and perplexities: Theology, Bible Criticism, Mysticism, Psychology, Feminism. A whole new library attended the process as well as many intense sharings, discussions, and probings with new as well as some old friends. Needless to say, many religious idols toppled from their pedestals as I developed a new understanding of God, Christ, the Bible and its interpretation, and my own autonomy and responsibility as a grown partner rather than a child of God. I saw myself as a drop in the ocean that was God, qualitatively the same, and holographically the same. I frightened my husband by declaring that I was of the essence of God, just like Jesus.



Another image came to me of God as the Matrix from which everything originates, takes form and develops. Although matrix may be given a feminine connotation, it is gender neutral for me. In my exploration of the Goddess cultures and the Divine Feminine, I greatly benefitted from appropriating feminine qualities, but the notion of praying to Mother God rather than Father God was not particularly helpful. Personally I felt a need to be conscious of my connection to the Source of all Being at all times.

Guided and influenced by my reading of Ethelbert Stauffer, Gerda Weiler, Hanna Wolff, Elaine Pagels, Matthew Fox, and John Selby Spong, I gradually changed my view of the Bible from the literal, definitive and final Word of God to that of a collection of stories and experiences of a people and persons with their God, highly metaphorical as all Jewish literature is, arbitrarily cut off when some church

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fathers so decreed. Couldn't anyone today speak with the same authority of her/his experiences with God without constantly referring back to the Bible or legitimizing everything with a verse of Scripture?

When I left the church, most of my friends dropped me. My search and my questions concerning an authentic life of faith had become a threat to the churches I attended as well as to those that were close and dear to me. I also realized that mine was a journey into the unknown that I had to take alone, however painful that was. During those difficult years of re-birthing myself, I began to have an incredible urge to draw and paint. I discovered my creative center and healed myself as woman by painting mostly semi-abstract forms of the female body. I wanted to restore honor and dignity to the creative processes of a woman's life.

New spiritual practices have evolved. I experience living in God's presence like breathing. I do not separate between spiritual and non-spiritual ways of being and acting. Everything I am and do is spiritual, be that baking bread, cleaning the house,

painting a picture, journaling, meditating or exercising. I meditate regularly and my prayers have changed over time into sitting in silence before the Source of all Being or sending energetic thoughts of love, support and healing to whoever burdens my heart. I create ritual celebrations with family and friends around the dinner table as well as do my own quiet rituals in the woods, by the ocean or in my stone circle. I sometimes participate in retreats that promise further growth and open myself to new thinking on old topics. It is important to me that my actions and relationships with all people and Mother Earth are informed by love, compassion and thoughts of peace.

Sometimes I have a deep longing for a larger body of people that come together in ritual to express their faith. I don't know whether that longing is comparable to an adult's nostalgia for the paradise of childhood or whether it points to something I need in my life and must therefore find. What is holding me back from actively seeking such a body is my fear that once more I would have to compromise my integrity and authenticity of being and believing. ♦

Dialogue

by Karin Kliever

Karin Kliever lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She is currently studying at the University of Winnipeg in the area of conflict resolution.

This dialogue was inspired by Mary Daly's article, "Looking Glass Society," in Ann Loades' reader on feminist theology. Daly writes satirically about the "looking glass society," a place in which Woman was created to reflect Man's glory, just as Man reflects God's glory. Here, Woman is responsible for making Man look twice as large as he really is, but as she does this, her own identity becomes lost. For too many centuries, women have been treated (and have treated themselves) as less important than men. Several examples are the woman who, after a hard day at home, must put on a happy face and a hot meal for her husband; the girl who is owned by men throughout her life; and the couple who,

when married, are introduced to the congregation as "Mr. and Mrs. (insert male's name here)."

My own personal convictions were incorporated with some principles that I have been learning through independent thought and study and through a course on feminist theology taken at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I feel fuller and richer for what I have learned. It is amazing how liberated a person can feel as soon as she can further identify with a cause, or a person, or in this case, her Creator.

Our interchange involves Man and Woman. Throughout the dialogue, Man and Woman together make moves that

promote equality. It is only on equal footing that women and men can most fully worship and experience God, as both genders were/are created as equals in God's image (Genesis 1:27). This dialogue is a journey, just as we are all on a journey.

Six aspects, vital and unique to a feminist theological point of view, are addressed. The first is SPEECH. Woman is struggling for recognition. She will not be entirely free unless she is empowered, and this will not be achieved if her right to speak is merely granted. Therefore, Man is silent until she makes a noise. From there it is discovered that, just as Man cannot see Woman (for she is covered with mirrors), so Woman cannot see herself, as her eyes are blinded. This segment involving EYES speaks of discovering, loving and valuing oneself and one's identity. With the blindfold taken off of her eyes, Woman can see herself for who she really is—an independent person with potential, beauty, and unique gifts and identity. Next, liberation of the HANDS symbolizes action and worship in everyday life. Both Woman and Man's hands are tied. Woman's hands are tied because her forms of service and action have traditionally been limited, and Man's are tied because he can learn a lot from his partner by giving, serving, loving, and thus experiencing God in day-to-day living.

The BODY is also an important aspect of feminist theology, as many parallels have been drawn between Jesus' suffering on the cross and women's experiences, namely the miracles of childbirth (my body broken for you) and menstruation (life-giving blood). Feminist theology seeks to celebrate the body parts and bodily functions that make women unique. As all of life can be seen as worship, things that normally might be seen as dirty or inconvenient (such as menstruation) can now be seen as starting points for worship. A woman should not be imprisoned by, or because of, her own body (Judges 19). The fifth aspect is the MIND. Re-legitimizing women's intellectual abilities involve recognizing and applying new forms of thought and theology. It must be acknowledged that women's minds are worthy of recognition and celebration, as they have the potential to hold new thoughts, interpretations, and ideas.

The idea of God-experience through life-experience leads to a final aspect included in the dialogue, the idea of engaging the HEART. The word "engagement" refers to the weaving of life-experience into God-experience, and head-knowledge into heart-knowledge. These two are inseparable, and as a person engages with God, a fuller and more beautiful spirit will be co-created by both beings.

Through writing this dialogue, I have learned that it is okay to question, and that I can explore my doubts while still clinging to comforts that I have found to be true—God's faithfulness and concern and the Bible's themes of salvation and liberation. These truths are vital to any life-journey and any seeker who desires to engage in worship and discover new aspects of self and Creator.

SPEECH/EYES

(Woman is sitting, gagged with mirrors around her. Man is standing three steps up on a ladder.)

W: *(struggling to ungag herself. Finally she succeeds. Man looks with curiosity.)* I can speak.

M: Do you have anything to say?

W: I have centuries of hidden stories. I have a wealth of wisdom long ignored.

M: *(Starts reading litany.)* Holy Creator . . . *(Stops. Looks at woman.)* Will you not worship?

W: I will worship.

M: Why not now?

W: What do you see?

M: *(looks; she is covered in mirrors.)* I see myself.

W: So if I were to worship . . .

M: It would not be you.

W: Yes.

M: I see. So what is to be done?

It is only on equal footing that women and men can most fully worship and experience God, as both genders were/are created as equals in God's image (Genesis 1:27). This dialogue is a journey, just as we all are on a journey.

continued on page 12

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W: My eyes are blinded. I cannot worship when I cannot see myself.

(Woman takes the mirror from her eyes and holds it in front of her. Man takes it and gives her a better view of herself. Hangs it in a prominent space so they both can see. Goes back on the ladder but only climbs two steps.)

W: I see God's creation with my eyes. I see God's faithfulness with my eyes. I see you with my eyes. But you are not God for me.

M: Now I see.

HANDS

M: *(Starts reading again)* Perfect See-er . . . Will you not worship?

W: I will worship.

M: Why not now?

W: What do you see?

M: I see myself.

W: So if I were to worship . . .

M: It would not be you.

W: Yes.

M: I see. So what is to be done?

W: My hands are tied. I cannot worship with tight fists and no action.

M: I'll help you.

W: But I am not alone.

M: *(For the first time notices his chains, half-realization, half-statement)* I am bound too.

W: Yes.

(They stand up and simultaneously unchain each other. There's a look of realization and freedom as they stand next to each other, but just as suddenly it hardens again and they go back to their spots. Man, however, this time climbs only one step onto the ladder.)

W: I serve God with my hands. I serve others with my hands. I serve you with my hands. But you are not God for me.

BODY

M: *(Continuing reading)* Miracle Worker. . . Will you not worship?

W: I will worship.

M: Why not now?

W: What do you see?

M: *(Almost in bewilderment)* I see myself.

W: So if I were to worship. . .

M: It would not be you.

W: Yes.

M: I see. So what is to be done?

W: My body is broken. I worship as a whole.

M: What breaks your body?

W: Suffering. Pain. The fact that it is not mine.

M: What makes your body?

W: My father *and* my mother. My emotion. My action. My shed blood which brings life.

M: And I cannot be a part of it?

W: You can. But this body must first be mine to give.

(Woman takes the mirror off her lap. Man takes it from her and puts it into the configuration. She stands up, and he returns to the ladder but only climbs one step.)

W: God gave my life through a body. God gives me life through my body. God gives you life through my body. But you are not God for me.

MIND

M: *(Continuing the reading)* Great Image-Bearer . . . Will you not worship?

W: I will worship.

M: Why not now?

W: What do you see?

M: I see myself . . . *(just like a quick after-thought)* but I also see you.

W: But if I were to worship . . .

M: *(Resignedly)* It still would not be you.

W: Yes

M: So what is to be done?

W: My mind has been masked. *We* need to understand.

M: What do we need to understand?

W: Me. My potential. My capabilities. My weakness. My strength.

M: How is this to be done?

W: By living. By hearing. By acknowledging.

M: I will.

(Woman takes the mirror off her head, he takes it from her, etc. This time, Man remains on the floor, and they seem ready to engage together, and he takes a breath as if to start, but suddenly Woman sits down.)

W: I engage in thought through my mind. I engage with God through my mind. I engage with you through my mind. But you are not God for me.

HEART

M: *(Reading . . .)* All-Knowing Presence . . . Will you not worship?

W: *(With conviction)* I will worship

M: Why not now?

W: What do you see?

M: I see you, but I also see myself.

W: What do you *want* to see?

M: *All* of you. So what can be done?

W: My heart has dulled. I do not worship without engagement.

M: What is engagement?

W: God-experience and life-experience. Woven and infused.

M: How is this to be done?

W: *(Stands up, starts arranging the symbols until they create a single image).* By seeing, doing, being, learning, searching.

M: *(Helps her finish the image)* With new perspectives.

W: Yes!

(Together, they look at the mirrored image, now facing each other on level ground.)

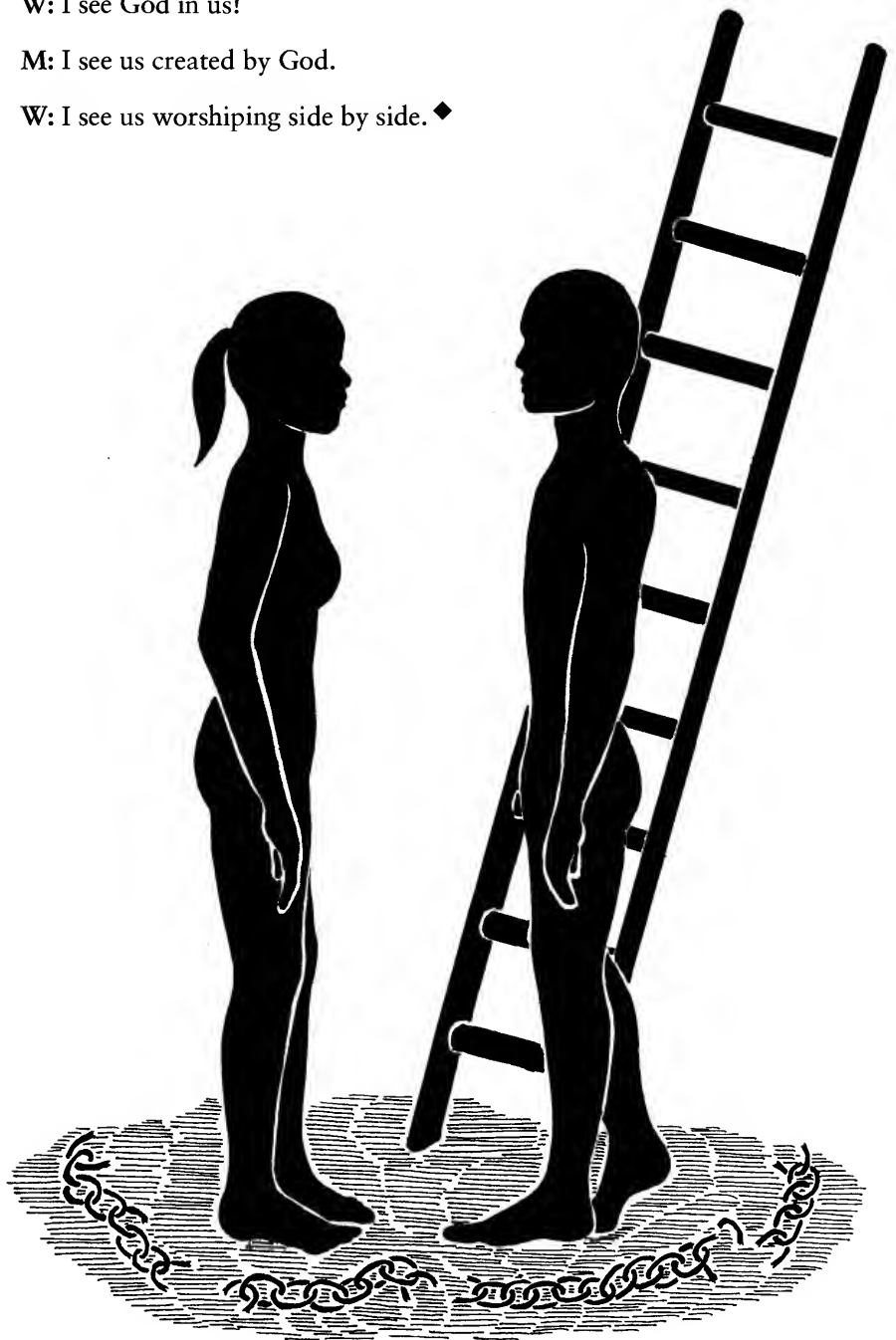
W: Now what do you see?

M: I see us!

W: I see God in us!

M: I see us created by God.

W: I see us worshipping side by side. ♦



Litany

Holy Creator,
surely we have heard of your heart,
surely we have seen your works of love and justice.

Do not be silent, O God-of-our-praises,
We remember those who have no voices
and ask that you remember mercy.

Perfect See-er,
We pray that your eye which knows the sparrow
will be present in our visions and our sight.

Miracle-Worker,
We recognize a need and desire your compassion.
Let justice be carried out through our hands.

Great Image-Bearer,
We confess we have fallen prey
Men: to a culture which glorifies domination over the weak
Women: and we to society's ideas of passive perfection.
Let our bodies be our own, celebrated and loved.

All-knowing Presence,
We reclaim our minds as vessels of wisdom to be shared
and not places where power is wielded.

Divine Artist,
We pledge our hearts, asking that you help us create
a verse, a song, a tapestry
woven with life-experience and experience of you.

Let our speech, hands, bodies, minds and hearts
be an extension of Yours.
We ask that you walk alongside of us
as we walk alongside each other.
Guide us in our search for equality.
Guide us in our search for You.

—Karin Kliewer



THE ARTICLE "BARRIERS IN OUR OWN attitudes" in the May-June issue inspired me to do some soul-searching. I began to look at my own attitudes toward my role in the North American business world and realized that there are certain parts of my attitude that may indeed hinder me in my business life. However, I also believe that we need to look at what has inherently shaped the attitudes that we have.

In North American society, the majority of business life defines normality by standards set long ago by white men. Having been born into this society, it is very easy for us to assume that these norms are correct and that we need to adjust ourselves to live out these standards. People have often told me that I need to shed some of my feminine ways to get to the top of the career-oriented success ladder. So, when I read that "we need to define ourselves in terms of those skills which are different from the feminine skills we employ in personal settings," I found myself viewing this as a correct assumption. Until I asked, "Why?"

There are 60-70 **African Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women** who have had theological or pastoral training but only one ordained woman in these churches. Mennonite World Conference's Gift Sharing program is sponsoring gatherings to discuss how these women's gifts can be better used by the church. They are hoping to present their findings at the Bulawayo MWC Assembly in 2003.

The Wisdom of Daughters: Two Decades of the Voice of Christian Feminism, the book reviewed in the last issue of *Report*, was published by Innisfree Press in 2001 and can be purchased for \$17.95 U.S.

Mennonite Women have published a new study guide of Philippians, **Joy for the Journey**, by Anita Janzen. Copies may be purchased for \$5 U.S. from the MW office: 722 Main St., P.O. Box 347, Newton, KS 67114; phone toll-free (800) 794-5101, ext. 227; mw@mennoniteusa.org.

I question the need to shed the very part of my being that defines what I care about and who I am so that I might advance in the business world. I get frustrated that men have the privilege of showing their true selves day and night, and I must reserve my true self for the privacy of my home. I have asked myself why I must conform to white-male dominated norms while doing so stifles who I really am.

Unless we begin to look at the societal values which have helped to shape our attitudes about ourselves, we will not be able to be in a truly life-giving occupation, no matter how successful our North American society may deem us. We must begin to look at feminine skills as positive and needed in today's business world. Once we as a society begin to see these attitudes as barriers to women in leadership, we will begin on the road toward a new discovery of what the business world will define as normal.

Sincerely,
Tina Hartman

Peace Is . . . by Jennifer deGroot is a book of words and pictures from women in Africa and Asia who insist the world be a better place for the next generation. It is available from MCC Canada for \$28Cdn/\$18U.S. Proceeds from this book will assist MCC programs contributing to women and peace in India and Africa. More information can be found at www.mcc.org/canada/womensconcerns.

The sixth biennial **Women Doing Theology Conference** will be held at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia from May 15-17, 2003. The theme will be *Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating* and will concentrate on theology and the arts. The Bible verse that will shape this conference is "Let me abide in your tent forever, find refuge under the shelter of your wing," Psalm 61:4. For more information, contact Women's Concerns, MCC U.S., P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501; djg@mccus.org. ♦



Editor's note: In agreement with our goal to offer a place for dialogue between women within the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches, we invite letters from readers that speak to the issues raised and the perspectives presented in *Report*. Although we try to print all letters, they may be shortened or edited to fit available space. All letters must be signed, but writers may request to have their names withheld.



Correction: The biographical information for Janet Janzen, author of the article "Taking leadership in the Middle East" in the "Barriers to women in leadership" issue should have read Janet Martens Janzen serves as co-director for MCC's Middle East Department with her husband Rick. She currently lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba.



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WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT

Looking Forward

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2002

An Anabaptist theology
opposing violence
against women



JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2003

Looking back: Former
Women's Concerns' staff



MARCH-APRIL 2003

Healing from and
preventing abuse:
MCC's work



MAY-JUNE 2003

Women in Columbia

Women in leadership

Regina Shands Stoltzfus has started as associate campus pastor at Goshen College. She holds a master's degree in biblical studies from Ashland Theological Seminary.

Mennonite Church USA women ordained or licensed in 2002:

Carmen Schrock-Hurst was ordained to pastoral ministry at Pittsburgh Mennonite Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on January 13.

Joan Bal was ordained as chaplain of Cenacle Retreat House in Houston, Texas on January 27.

Lorene Derstine was licensed for chaplain ministry in Harleysville, Pennsylvania on January 27.

Marie Gilot was licensed as assistant pastor at Assemblée de la Grace in Immokalee, Florida on March 10.

Phyllis Tribby was ordained for pastoral ministry at Arvada Mennonite Church, Arvada, Colorado on March 17.

Maeanna Regier was commissioned as assistant pastor at First Mennonite Church, Halstead, Kansas on April 14.

Anita Amstutz was licensed as the new pastor of Albuquerque Mennonite Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico on May 12.

Gwen Gustafson-Zook was ordained for pastoral ministry at Faith Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana on May 19.

Nina Lanctot was ordained for pastoral ministry at Belmont Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Indiana on May 26.

Helen Yoder was licensed as deacon at West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa on June 2.

Shana Peachey Boshart was licensed in her role as conference youth minister in a special worship service at the Central Plains Conference assembly on June 15.

Sharon Kennel was ordained in her role as regional conference minister of Central Plains on June 15 at the Central Plains Conference assembly.

Naomi Engle began part-time pastorate work on June 30 at Aurora Mennonite Church, Aurora, Ohio. She is pastoring with her husband Jess.